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Keywords

commitment, adolescence, African American, qualitative, romantic relationships

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society | Gender and Sexuality | Human Ecology | Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

Few studies have examined adolescents' understanding of romantic relationship commitment, particularly among African American youth. Using three waves of semistructured interviews, the present descriptive study addresses this topic by exploring the ways in which 20 African American adolescents (age range 13-19 years) from low-income backgrounds conceptualize and describe commitment in romantic relationships. Qualitative analyses revealed three main themes related to defining commitment, indicating that which commitment provides, and describing the nature of commitment in different relationship contexts. Findings inform psychological research and practice relating to commitment and romantic relationships among African American adolescents.

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Keywords

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Several areas of research highlight the significant challenges that African American adults experience in developing and maintaining stable, satisfying romantic relationships (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Dixon, 2009). Given the lower rates of marriage and levels of marital stability among African Americans compared with other ethnicities (Bulanda & Brown, 2007), particular attention has been devoted to understanding aspects of commitment in African American adults' romantic relationships (Chaney, 2014; Davis, Williams, Emerson, & Hourd-Bryant, 2000). Romantic relationship commitment, however, is not an issue that exclusively affects adults. It also emerges prominently during the developmental stage of adolescence, when romantic relationships are typically initiated. Moreover, as other authors have noted (Towner, Dolcini, & Harper, 2015), understanding commitment among African American adolescents carries important public health implications due to the HIV/STI risks for adolescents stemming from nonmonogamous, uncommitted romantic relationships. Sexual romantic relationships marked by a lack of commitment (e.g., sexual concurrency) have been associated with HIV/STI risk across multiple studies (see Nunn et al., 2014). Recent studies also have found African American young adults' sexual risk behaviors to be predicted significantly by their beliefs about their partners' commitment to the relationship and their own general beliefs about close relationships (Barton, Kogan, Cho, & Brown, 2015; Waldrop-Valverde et al., 2013).

The construct of commitment has been studied for decades by romantic relationship researchers, and is commonly cited as central to the formation and maintenance of stable, healthy romantic relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Most existing studies focusing on the ways in which individuals define, understand, and demonstrate commitment in romantic relationships have been conducted with samples of White adults (e.g., Fehr, 1988; Weigel, 2008). Consequently, adolescents' views of commitment within romantic relationships have remained largely unexplored, despite the significance of adolescence as a stage in which beliefs about relationships are formed (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). This scarcity of research is particularly evident among low-income African American adolescents, a population whose romantic relationships have been characterized in previous research as vulnerable to a lack of commitment (e.g., Eyre, Flythe, Hoffman, & Fraser, 2012). To address this issue and to inform efforts to promote healthy and safe romantic relationships among African American adolescents, the present study aims to provide insight into the understanding of commitment

among an understudied population of adolescents at risk for relationship instability. Specifically, using qualitative analyses of interviews with 20 youth, the study explores the ways in which low-income African American adolescents conceptualize, describe, and apply commitment within romantic relationships.

Literature Review

Relevant Theories and Conceptualizations in the Study of Commitment

Historically, most research on commitment in romantic relationships has been based on interdependence (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and social exchange (e.g., Blau, 1964) theories because of the consistent attention they give to relationship development and persistence. From these general theories, psychology scholars have developed several models describing commitment in romantic relationships (see Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Rusbult, 1980; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Most commitment theorists have adopted a multidimensional perspective to define the construct, with commitment defined in terms of psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intention to persist in a relationship (see Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). When these elements are strongly present within both individuals, the relationship is generally characterized as having a high level of commitment.

Previous research has also examined individuals' understanding of commitment, both in terms of its definition and demonstration. Conceptually, individuals from the general population have defined commitment as including central themes of loyalty, responsibility, fidelity to one's word, and faithfulness (Fehr, 1988). Behaviorally, commonly reported indicators of commitment include support, statements of love and devotion to one's partner, and integrity (Weigel, 2008). In addition to conceptualizing and defining commitment, psychological research has devoted attention to understanding the development and function of commitment within romantic relationships (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001; Stanley et al., 2010). Researchers exploring this issue have emphasized that, during the development of any romantic relationship, both partners experience a degree of uncertainty concerning the relationship's future stability and the partner's reliability. Commitment develops in response to counter this anxiety and uncertainty within individuals and provide relational security, a sense that the relationship and partner will continue to be a part of an individual's life. This relational security afforded by commitment reduces anxiety about potential partner loss and helps secure romantic attachment.

To date, limitations are evident within the literatures on both the conceptualizing and functioning of commitment. Conceptually, efforts to identify individuals' understanding of commitment have been predominantly restricted to adult populations with primarily White samples. Consequently, little research has examined (a) understanding of relationship commitment during adolescence, a time when romantic relationships are beginning to emerge and attitudinal foundations are being formed (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001) or (b) commitment conceptualization in adolescent populations in which, on average, relationship commitment is inhibited by contextual stressors (e.g., African Americans; Eyre et al., 2012; Kurdek, 2008). At a functional level, current writing on the development of commitment has remained primarily conceptual, with minimal research examining this question empirically (for an exception, see Duemmler & Kobak, 2001).

Romantic Relationships Among Low-Income African American Adolescents

Adolescents' attitudes and conceptions of romantic relationships are influenced by many sources, including parents, peers, and the broader culture (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Sullivan et al., 2012). Consistent with this knowledge, research involving African American youth has examined the influence of parental support on adolescent responses to dating problems (Sullivan et al., 2012), peer norms on sexual activities (Dolcini et al., 2013), and music video exposure on youth attitudes toward male-female relationships (Y. Bryant, 2008). Several authors (e.g., C. M. Bryant et al., 2010; Dixon, 2009) have also highlighted threats to commitment and stability in romantic relationships within the African American community from external sociohistorical forces. Structural inequalities resulting from enslavement, declines in family wages and labor opportunities, and aversive family and community environments all have introduced strains that shape the broader context of African Americans' romantic relationships (Pinderhughes, 2002) and thereby influence notions of commitment among youth reared in this context.

The influence of contextual factors on relationship beliefs and functioning occurs in both adolescence and adulthood. For instance, African American youth living in high-crime areas have been found to develop a cynical, hostile view of people and relationships (Simons & Burt, 2011). Similarly, adverse childhood circumstances among African American youth (e.g., harsh parenting, family instability, racial discrimination) have been found to predict distrustful relational schemas in adolescence, which, in turn, predicted discordant

romantic relationships in early adulthood (Simons, Simons, Lei, & Landor, 2012). Adults residing in disadvantaged communities have also been observed to be hesitant to marry, presumed in part to be due to the gravity of such a commitment in an unpredictable environment (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Thus, commitment dynamics in romantic relationships can be impaired by multiple factors, including sociohistorical, cultural, environmental, and familial influences (Eyre et al., 2012; Pinderhughes, 2002; Simons et al., 2012). Collectively, such findings suggest the potential for commitment beliefs to be more tenuous among African American adolescents, as well as adults, residing in adverse contexts.

Ethnographic research with urban, low-income African American adolescents has documented instability and uncertainty in their daily environments, including their own romantic relationships and those they observe (Anderson, 1990). Previous research on commitment in urban African American adolescents' romantic relationships, which has largely occurred within the context of relationship fidelity and monogamy (e.g., Eyre et al., 2012), highlights infidelity as a common concern (Eyre, Auerswald, Hoffman, & Millstein, 1998). African American male adolescents are particularly likely to have noncommittal orientations toward relationships and to pursue multiple dating or sexual partners (Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004; Towner et al., 2015). To illustrate, Towner et al. (2015) interviewed 28 urban African American adolescents and identified four themes related to romantic relationship commitment: (a) young women made commitments in the hope that one day they would be in a mutually monogamous relationship, (b) adolescent mothers committed to their children's fathers despite the relationship quality or the fathers' commitment levels, (c) young men felt that they could maintain multiple partnerships by not committing to one young woman, and (d) a few participants were unsure about commitment. Although this work elucidated aspects of commitment dynamics within actual relationships, no attention appears to have been given to adolescents' definitions of commitment or of being committed.

Contributions of the Present Study

The present study was designed to provide an account of the conceptualization, description, and application of commitment in a sample of low-income African American adolescents. In addition to addressing the aforementioned need for research on commitment and its conceptualization, the current study also extends the existing body of research on adolescent romantic relationships. To date, most research on adolescent romantic relationships, whether focused exclusively on African Americans or on participants from several

ethnic groups, has investigated self-reported romantic behaviors and relationship characteristics. Accordingly, researchers have called for greater attention to “the more subjective but critically important [relationship] processes,” including aspects of commitment (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005, p. 546). Understanding romantic relationship concepts among members of at-risk populations is particularly important for prevention and intervention purposes to inform the content of messages communicated in programs for these populations (Eyre et al., 2012).

The current study additionally informs the literature on relationship commitment by examining adolescents’ conceptualizations and definitions of commitment. Existing assessments of commitment typically ask participants to evaluate their commitment with respect to a particular relationship (e.g., “How committed are you to this relationship?”). Such assessments, however, do not take into consideration an individual’s a priori understanding of romantic relationship commitment in general. As with other psychological constructs studied as aspects of relationships (e.g., gratitude; Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009), understanding laypersons’ conceptualizations has important practical and theoretical implications, including improvements in the creation and refinement of measures.

This study’s qualitative design is advantageous in several respects. First, qualitative inquiry facilitates understanding of adolescents’ romantic relationships by capturing their subjective cognitive processes. Research on adolescents’ romantic relationships usually is grounded in the researchers’ viewpoints and their framing of particular issues rather than in the adolescents’ perspectives. This approach, however, does not answer questions regarding the degree to which researchers’ views of commitment align with adolescents’ perceptions and conceptualizations of this construct. Qualitative methodology permits the expression of adolescents’ own voices, vocabulary, and beliefs. Given the understudied nature of this domain, qualitative insights can also provide a basis from which further studies and hypotheses can be generated (Patton, 1990). Because relatively little is known about the ways in which adolescents, particularly in this population, generally conceptualize commitment, the current study was considered to be exploratory.

Method

Participants

Youth were recruited from a Boys’ and Girls’ Club located within a public housing community in a medium-sized city in the southeastern United States in 2010. To qualify for participation, youth were required to be (a) at least 13

years of age, (b) willing to participate in a relationship education program, (c) willing to take part in three interviews, and (d) residing in a household with earnings equal to or less than the median household income for the county. The income requirement arose from the grant program's mission of addressing issues of persistent poverty, ameliorating its correlates and consequences, and improving individual economic well-being along with community prosperity. The project aims were to understand better low-income African American adolescents' socialization for and experiences with romantic relationships, and to implement a relationship education program for youth.

Youth and parents who frequented the local Boys' and Girls' Club were informed about the project by the club director and invited to attend an information session. The research team hosted a recruitment event at the club to meet with youth and their parents or other guardians to recruit eligible participants. Twenty-five Black youth were asked to participate in a project focused on romantic relationships, including both their personal experiences and relationships they had observed. The university institutional review board approved this research project and ethical guidelines for recruitment were adhered to. The risks and benefits of taking part in the project were described to the parents and eligible youth, and the youth were reminded that their participation was voluntary and assured that they could leave the study at any time without penalty. At the recruitment event, research team members completed a screening form for each participant. Parents reported their family income to verify their child's eligibility to participate in the study. Research team members read the informed consent document to parents and youth and responded to any questions they had regarding the study. Parental consent and minor assent were obtained for youth 17 years old and younger by requesting each individual sign the university-approved paperwork. For youth aged 18 years or older, research team members read the informed consent document to the participants and then gave them the opportunity to sign the consent form. No one declined to participate. The research team was unable to contact three young men to schedule the first interview; the remaining 22 youth (13 young women, 9 young men) completed the study (an 88% retention rate).

At baseline, the sample's mean age was 16 years (range: 13-19 years). All participants were enrolled in high school; the average grade level was 10th grade (range: 6th-12th grade). Most youth (64%) resided with their single biological mothers; 27% lived with both of their biological parents or a biological parent and a stepparent. Another 9% had parents with joint physical custody and spent equal time at each parent's home. The households in which youth resided had a mean annual income of \$14,304 (range: \$6,000-\$21,936) or \$1,192 per month (range: \$500-\$1,828). Of the sample, 68% reported their

religious background as Christian, 23% reported having no religion, and 9% did not respond to the question. Most youth (64%) reported dating but without a commitment to one partner; 27% reported a committed relationship; and 9% did not answer the question. We did not ask participants to report their sexual orientation, but this information naturally emerged during data collection as participants described their thoughts and behaviors surrounding romantic relationships.

Procedure

Youth and interviewers were matched on race and sex, demonstrating sensitivity to the youth as well as an awareness of the importance of connecting with others with a similar cultural background. This matching took place in hopes of maximizing the likelihood that the youth would feel comfortable with the interviewers (Cooney, Small, & O'Connor, 2007; McCurdy & Daro, 2001). The three Black interviewers (2 men, 1 woman) were experienced in working with youth in low-income communities and skilled in conducting qualitative interviews. Both men held bachelor's degrees; the woman held a high school diploma. Each interviewer completed human subjects training and spent 2 hours in training with the project's principal investigator prior to each wave of data collection. To ensure that data collection proceeded smoothly, interviewers were educated about project goals and interview protocols and trained in effective interviewing techniques.

All participating youth were interviewed on three occasions over a 6-month period, at 3-month intervals. All interviews were conducted in a private room at the Boys' and Girls' Club or another reserved room (e.g., conference room at an office or university library) to ensure confidentiality. Youth enrolled in the study were asked to participate in a relationship education program for adolescents, *Love U2: Relationship Smarts Plus* curriculum (<http://www.dibblefund.org/>), between the first and second interviews (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Pearson, 2007). The 13-session program was delivered at the Boys' and Girls' Club after school over a 7-week period. After each session, youth were served a meal to encourage attendance and enhance rapport with the research team. Youth program attendance ranged from 1 to 13 sessions, with a mean attendance of 7.63 sessions ($SD = 4.12$).

Working within a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm, we focused on understanding youth's views of their own social realities (Creswell, 2003). To capture the youth's meanings of commitment inductively, we used qualitative data collection. Specifically, a phenomenological approach guided data collection to record best the youth's lived experiences and the meanings that

they attached to these encounters. Phenomenology is a qualitative tradition that focuses on description of the meaning of individuals' lived experiences of a concept (Creswell, 2012); in this study, the concept was commitment. A semistructured interview style was used to assess the youth's perspectives from audio recorded narratives about their lives. In general, each interview focused on the youth's relationship expectations, communication and conflict management styles, relationship history, and relationship socialization. Question content varied across interviews to facilitate exploration of a variety of issues related to adolescents' experiences with, observations of, and reflections on romantic relationships.

In terms of the current analyses, one specific question on commitment was asked during the first interview: "What does it mean to commit to someone else?" Youth and interviewers spontaneously made other comments on commitment as they discussed youth's experiences, observations, and beliefs about romantic relationships. Although interviewers used the questionnaire protocol as a guide, they were encouraged to allow the conversation to flow and to give youth the opportunity to share experiences that might not relate to the line of questioning. Interviewers followed up on emergent or unexpected revelations and disclosures. Because qualitative inquiry is more personal than is quantitative research and uses a semistructured interviewing style, the interviewers were flexible in their line of questioning, rephrasing, or following up on questions as needed.

Most interviews lasted 1.5 hours. Participants were paid \$25 at the first interview, \$50 at the second interview, and \$75 at the third interview. All interviews were documented using digital recorders and stored using participant identification numbers to ensure confidentiality. An experienced transcriptionist transcribed the recordings, and four undergraduate research interns checked the transcripts for accuracy. These interns listened to the digital recordings and read the transcripts simultaneously to verify complete transcription since the transcriber was not a member of the research team (Carlson, 2010). Any inconsistencies were corrected.

Reliability was ensured through ongoing communication between the principal investigator and the interviewers, who met weekly to evaluate the project's progress, discuss interviews' observations, and solicit suggestions for questions that should be asked in follow-up interviews. Interviewers reported no problems in adhering to the data collection protocol. The interviewers' efforts to collect rich, clear, and precise data added to the credibility of the study findings and conclusions. The research team connected with the youth in their housing projects and home environments and developed rapport with them to increase the likelihood that the youth would offer honest accounts of their experiences. Thus, the interview method encouraged a thorough

understanding of the youth's thoughts and feelings about their lives. In this respect, the method of qualitative data collection we used increased the likelihood that the data accurately reflected the youth's lived experiences, enhancing internal validity (Creswell, 1998). Additionally, the principal investigator of the project and a research assistant regularly checked the digital recordings to ensure that the interviewers used the interview protocol as a guide and conducted the interviews in a semistructured manner. Reliability was enhanced by analyzing transcripts and recordings first individually and then as a team. The research team met monthly to reflect on their own experiences with the youth during the education program. In this way, we relied on different sources of information to understand similar issues and concerns in the data (Schutt, 1996).

Accuracy and integrity of participants' responses were also strengthened from the relationship the adolescents developed with the research team, including the interviewers. Moreover, all youth were interviewed in person and closely observed in their home environments. This allowed the research team to comprehend better how the youth viewed their life experiences. The research team discussed the nature and content of the adolescents' interviews during the data collection process to increase the trustworthiness of the data. Discussing the interviews as a team helped control for biases and blind spots in gathering and interpreting the data.

Analyses

Content analysis was conducted across 66 interviews (22 youth interviewed at each of the three waves), with open, axial, and selective stages of coding (Creswell, 1998). Analysis began with open coding by identifying general sections for exploration and categorization by reading all commitment comments appearing across the 66 interviews. This was followed by axial coding that identified domains and subcategories within each domain, including labeling dominant themes from youth's responses. Comments from youth were not limited to application within one particular domain, but classified according to their representativeness of each phenomenon of interest. Last, selective coding was conducted by choosing exemplar comments from the categories identified in the preceding analysis and integrating them into narrative results. The first author conducted initial analyses, which the coauthors reviewed.

Related to internal validity, the data collection methodology (e.g., natural environment interviews) improved the likelihood that the data approximated the lived experience of the youth in important ways (Creswell, 1998). Moreover, the in-person interview method allowed for a better understanding of the ways the adolescents thought and felt about their life experiences.

Because of the more personal nature of qualitative inquiry and semistructured nature of the interviewing, the interviewers were flexible in their line of questioning with the research participants, rephrasing or following up on questions, as needed.

Comments were not differentiated by interview wave, as adolescents were not systematically asked about commitment over time. Thus, longitudinal data analysis was not permissible. Youth commented on commitment, however, throughout the series of interviews, permitting content analyses of their comments. Hence, the plan of analyses concentrated on the description of this understudied population of adolescents' understanding, description, and application of commitment.

In the interest of transparency, the authors' backgrounds related to the issues explored in the study are presented (Carlson, 2010). All authors were born in the United States. Two authors were raised in the Southern United States, the region of the country from which the sample was drawn. All other authors were raised in the Midwest or in multiple states throughout the United States. Three authors identify as people of color; three authors do not. Three of the authors were raised in working-class households; the other three came from middle-class backgrounds. All have pursued advanced education and are highly educated. Five authors are married and one is single. Three authors have children with spouses to whom they are currently married. Three authors do not have children.

Results

Preliminary analysis of the interviews revealed that two young women, aged 16 and 17 years, provided no commentary about commitment. Nowhere in any of the interviews did either participant spontaneously mention this construct and, when asked to define it, both replied, "I don't know." Across the remaining interviews, 76 different text units appeared in which the word "commitment" or some variant (i.e., committed, committing, or commit) was used when discussing romantic relationships (e.g., "What does being committed mean?"). The coding analyses identified three general domains that encompassed adolescents' comments about this construct: (a) definition of commitment, (b) commitment's influence on a relationship, and (c) the nature of commitment in different relational contexts. In the remainder of the results, each of these central domains is explicated and supplemented with youth's statements. Comments that diverge from these central themes are also included when they document areas of variability in a youth's conceptualization and application of commitment. Throughout the results, pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality.

Domain 1: Definition of Commitment

The first domain emerging in the analyses concerned the youth's specific definition of the meaning of commitment to another. Findings for this domain drew on data from 16 adolescents who responded to the question asked during the first interview, "What does it mean to be committed to someone?" Within this domain, two main themes, *Support and Care* and *Honesty and Fidelity*, emerged.

Support and Care. The first subdefinition of commitment was support and care, which 11 youth (69% of those with responses in Domain 1) mentioned. For these youth, commitment was something that was manifested and demonstrated through caring actions, thoughts, and behaviors. As Rachel, a 17-year-old girl, stated that being committed means, "[You] support them always." Similarly, when asked what it means to commit to someone, Robin, a young woman 15 years of age, replied, "Just to be there when they need you." Overall, girls ($n = 6$) and boys ($n = 5$) expressed similar numbers of comments about support.

Some youth ($n = 4$) specifically described being committed as "taking care" of the other person. Being committed meant looking out for the good and welfare of the other. According to Katie, a 15-year-old girl, "Well . . . committed to someone [means] to take care or something like that." Darryl, a 16-year-old boy, commented, "You'll pretty much be there for her when, when she needs it. You'll pretty much care for her when she's sick and stuff." The supportive nature that defined commitment was also demonstrated through comments emphasizing showing love to one's partner ($n = 4$). As a clear exemplar, Kayla, a 17-year-old girl, stated that committing to someone means, "Showing unconditional love and just having their support." Among boys, love was explicitly mentioned once by Lamar, a 16-year-old boy, who stated that being committed to someone else meant: "No matter what you still love them or just want to be their friend or something like that, no matter what happens." Finally, the supportive nature of commitment emerged in comments linking commitment to sacrificing and investing for the stability of the relationship ($n = 4$). To quote Tanisha, a 17-year-old girl, committing to someone meant: "We're willing to do anything just to make the relationship work." Other comments such as "willing to do anything" and "no matter what" also emphasized this sacrificial aspect that defined being committed.

Honesty and Fidelity. The second theme defining commitment, honesty and fidelity, was mentioned by nine youth (56% of those with responses within Domain 1). For instance, being committed meant partners speaking truthfully

to each other ($n = 6$). Five youth (31%) explicitly mentioned “trust” to describe that which being committed entails. For example, Robbie, an 18-year-old boy commented, “What does it mean to be committed? Well, I would say being trustworthy.” Similarly, Brittany, a 19-year-old girl, responded, “To me, you got to really have trust in your relationship to do any kind of committing to anything.” As with support, similar numbers of boys ($n = 5$) and girls ($n = 4$) made comments about fidelity.

For four youth, the theme of honesty and fidelity was expressed through being faithful and not pursuing other potential relationships or “talking” to other people. As Michelle, an 18-year-old girl, explained, “[Commitment] means to be one with that person, you can’t talk to him and then go out there and try to talk to somebody else.” Similarly, DeShawn, a 16-year-old boy, responded that committing to someone means, “Knowing you ain’t going to . . . talk to other girls or . . . cheat on them.”

In sum, youth defined commitment as both performing (e.g., nurturing, supporting) and avoiding (e.g., lying, cheating) certain actions. These two themes were summarized succinctly by Tyler, a 15-year-old boy: “To talk to them, don’t cheat on them, tell them the truth about everything.”

Domain 2: Commitment’s Influence on a Relationship

Comments representing Domain 2 emerged from all three interviews as youth described how relationships begin, offered their thoughts on marriage, and gave general commentary on relationships (e.g., “What would be your ideal relationship?”). Collectively, nine youth described commitment as providing *relational security* (45% of sample with commitment comments). As the following responses highlight, because of commitment, individuals could be more confident about the continued presence of the partner as well as less anxious about dissolution of the relationship.

Commitment provided relational security by affording partners a sense of stability and permanency about the relationship ($n = 5$). In the absence of commitment, the longevity of the relationship was immediately cast into doubt, particularly when difficulties arose. Jayden, a 17-year-old boy, commented how in relationships without commitment, “Y’all can just move in together and when y’all going to have a big argument and . . . one or the other just move out and you be paying the bills on your own.” Because of uncertainty about future events, commitment was necessary to make sure that the relationship would persist. Robbie stated, “Being committed is a real big part of a relationship ‘cause you know anything can happen.” Lamar commented that, in being committed, “No matter what happens, y’all will always be friends.”

Commitment also provided relational security through knowing that someone would reliably be there. In fact, four youth explicitly mentioned “being there,” either for his or her partner or vice versa. As Jayden stated, “[Being committed means] you being there for her, her being there for you no matter what, you know what I’m saying.” This aspect of relational security was most clearly a part of marriage, constituting one of the qualities that separated marriage from other relationships (see Domain 3). A marital commitment meant knowing a partner would continuously be there with a degree of security not provided outside marriage. As described by Jayden, this acme of relational security was a motivating reason to get married:

[I want to get married in future] ‘cause I always have a girl right there by my side, she [will] always be there for me . . . a girl can break up with you, but your wife, she made a commitment and she will always be there for you.

Furthermore, two youth stated that a committed relationship provided relational security by reducing anxiety and worry about partner behaviors. For instance, Maurice, a 17-year-old boy, described being committed as, “[When you] let him go to his place and the other one go to her place like in another state and come back and everything will be, you know, [fine].” Mutually committed relationships provided greater freedom from certain fears and concerns that plague relationships without such commitment. Robbie described this security in marriage as

If you’re committed and you don’t argue a lot and don’t have to worry about anything, it should be less stressful. Because if you’re married you really don’t have to worry . . . about your girl going out doing things with other dudes.

In contrast to the 45% of youth who affirmed commitment as providing relational security and 95% who considered commitment to be important, the comments from one youth deviated from this general consensus. When asked about the importance of being committed to a person before living together, Latasha, a 13-year-old girl, replied, “Nope, [being committed is not important] cause you don’t never know what [will] happen in the future.”

Domain 3: The Nature of Commitment in Different Relational Contexts

Commitment Domain 3 included comments from eight youth (40% of sample with commitment comments) referring to actual romantic relationships. Data for this section emerged from comments in all three interviews as youth

discussed their own relationships, marriage, and relationships' general development (e.g., "How was it when you were just talking as friends and then it went to that serious mode?"). Coding analyses revealed that the nature of commitment was not identical across all relationship contexts, but differed in reference to dating ($n = 7$) or marriage ($n = 6$). Equal numbers of boys and girls, four of each gender, commented on this domain.

Commitment in Dating. For nonmarital romantic relationships, a clear distinction emerged between "just talking" versus "being committed." The prior noncommitted stage was characterized by personal freedom to pursue multiple relationship options. This pattern is illustrated by Kayla's current relationship situation:

Just talking to people, having fun but I'm not really ready for a commitment. [To become committed to one of them,] I have to stop talking to a lot of people and put my main focus on the boy that actually likes me.

Before becoming committed, one partner could have few expectations or demands of the other. As Rachel expressed, "If you're not committed then he's free to have sex with anybody, he can have sex with you and anybody else." Rachel's later comments surrounding cheating further emphasized the distinction between being committed and not committed.

I think you can only cheat on someone when you're committed to them, cause if you're not committed to someone that's not really cheating. But if you're committed and like going around talking to other people [or] having sex with other people when you're committed to someone, then that's cheating.

Once in a dating relationship, however, the parameters for permissible behaviors changed and expectations were established. For instance, six youth said that commitment in dating entailed not talking to other people and being able to demand certain behaviors from your partner. As Robbie expressed, when two individuals are committed in a dating relationship, "We shouldn't want to go out and talk to other guys and girls (and) . . . try to get with them." In addition, being committed in dating granted rights that could not be demanded prior to being committed. Rachel said, "When you actually get the commitment part, it's like, 'Oh yeah, I have the right to ask you where you are and who you're with because I am your boyfriend.'"

The term *commitment* was nearly synonymous and interchangeable with being in a dating relationship, as Robbie explained, "You know, because if you're going to be with someone, be with someone, be committed." In fact,

as these youth described romantic relationships at this level, the term *dating* was rarely, if ever, mentioned. Rather, to describe a present romantic relationship, youth referred to being committed or being serious.

Two youth said that the exclusivity and personal constraints required by being committed made dating relationships more difficult. Although providing the benefits described in Domains 1 and 2, commitment meant giving up other options, with greater restrictions placed on one's own behaviors and increased that which a partner could ask of them. This sentiment was clearly expressed by Jayden, who said:

It's harder to be in a relationship than being a pimp because being a pimp you can talk to how many girls you want. I don't care if they get mad when they find out you doing this and that because you don't go with them, you're not committed to them. But being in a relationship you got to worry about what your girl doing, what you think she doing or are you doing this right or you doing that right, are you treating her right, what does she think of you, do you think us should be together, you know, so it's harder in a relationship.

Commitment in Marriage. A second relationship context for commitment involved marriage. Despite use of the same term, the conceptual meaning of "commitment" in this context was quite distinct. Marriage represented the pinnacle of commitment in youth's understandings of this construct; its pre-eminent significance was described in various ways.

One distinguishing mark that five youth mentioned concerned the *duration and degree* of marital commitment. Whereas being committed in dating largely dealt with current behaviors and expectations, marital commitment emphasized the future and required much more from a person. Marriage meant a lifelong commitment, as Maurice stated, "[In marriage] you're committing a lot, you're committing your relationship with that person. You know you're gonna be with that person forever." In a similar fashion, Michelle mentioned how marriage is a "very, very, very, very big commitment." She also expressed, "A marriage is a big commitment in one's life because, well, you're actually stuck with that person for the rest of your life."

Marital commitment was also set apart by four youth given the *intentionality* associated with it. Marriage reflected a deliberate choice and intentional decision about an individual's commitment to his or her partner and their relationship. Robbie commented,

The way she probably take it is you're not married, so you might go out there and you might do something else [but] if you in a marriage, she be like well, you know, he's committed, he made his vows so you supposed to be there. Til death you know.

For three youth, the elevated nature of marital commitment also stemmed from its *declaration*. Unlike other relational commitments, youth mentioned that a marital commitment was clearly and formally expressed to the other person and, quite often, before others as well. As Jayden described, “[But when you are married] you said, you committed, you said ‘I do’ to that person.” This declaration of marital commitment also occurred at the transcendental level for Michelle, “[In marriage], you’ve actually made that big commitment in front of God . . . so I feel that if you go back on your promise to that special someone you’re actually going back on your promise to God.”

In summary, youth comments represented a nuanced understanding of romantic relationship commitment. Youth centrally defined commitment along dimensions of support and care as well as honesty and fidelity. In their comments, they also emphasized that commitment provides relational security to individuals in the relationship, reducing concern over partner loss and instilling confidence about the future of the relationship. Finally, youth comments on the nature of commitment in dating emphasized on current behaviors and actions, whereas comments on the nature of commitment in marriage emphasized long-term orientations to the relationship and a greater depth of commitment.

Discussion

Commitment in African Americans’ romantic relationships remains a topic of interest among psychologists (Fincham & Beach, 2014), social workers (Davis et al., 2000), and public health scientists (Eyre et al., 2012). The present study expands this area of research by investigating how low-income African American adolescents understand and conceptualize romantic relationship commitment. Despite the potential for tenuous beliefs about commitment given their social location, comments from these youth highlighted commitment as an important and valued aspect of romantic relationships. The following discussion highlights areas of convergence and divergence of the results with respect to the extant literature.

Collectively, youth’s description of commitment aligned with prior conceptualizations among both lay and academic communities (e.g., Fehr, 1988; Rusbult, 1980). Consistent with previous findings from lay communities, central features that defined commitment included loyalty, supportiveness, and faithfulness (Fehr, 1988). These features also aligned with adult populations’ descriptions of commitment indicators (Weigel, 2008). Congruence also appeared regarding the function of commitment, namely, providing both partners with a sense of relational security (Stanley et al., 2010). With its focus on describing what commitment *provides* more than what commitment

is, relational security advances the study of commitment by highlighting the internal dynamics of commitment within a relationship, why it develops, and its interplay with individuals' internal working models of relationships (see Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009). Although committing to a relationship is often perceived as a loss of personal freedom by giving up other options (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994), the relational security afforded by commitment suggests—and comments from the youth affirmed—that committing to a relationship can simultaneously be freeing by reducing anxiety about partner loss and the relationship's future.

As one divergence from current conceptualizations, commitment within adolescent relationships has been typically framed as developing over the course of a relationship and culminating in the final stage of the romantic relationship (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). From this framework, committed relationships are conceptualized as long term and involving deep attraction, intimacy, and care for one's partner (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). Comments from these youth also emphasized the significance of commitment on the initiation of a romantic relationship. This suggests that there may be two types of commitment in dating, one that develops during the dating process (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001) and the other that is declared through, and concomitant with, the start of the relationship.

Previous studies with low-income African Americans adolescents have shown romantic relationships to be rather tumultuous (Anderson, 1990), with infidelity among partners (Eyre et al., 2012) and distrustful, cynical relational schemas (Simons et al., 2012). Despite these findings, very few comments from youth indicated devaluations of the need for, or importance of, commitment within romantic relationships. Furthermore, no gender differences were evident in youth's conceptualizations and descriptions of commitment, despite gender asymmetries in the demonstration of commitment in actual romantic relationships during adolescence (Towner et al., 2015). Collectively, romantic relationship commitment also was viewed positively among this sample of low-income African American adolescents. Given the high levels of infidelity in dating relationships among urban African American adolescents (Eyre et al., 2012; Towner et al., 2015) and racial disparities in marital entry and stability (Bulanda & Brown, 2007), continued attention is needed to clarify the factors, from psychological to structural, that help account for this discrepancy between aspirations for commitment in romantic relationships and its actualization.

Finally, results also highlighted youth's understanding of differences in commitment with respect to dating relationships and marriages. Consistent with observations by other researchers, youth's comments on permanence (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), intentionality (Stanley et al., 2010), and public

declaration (Nock, 1998) associated with getting married all accorded greater weight to marital commitment. Thus, although marriage may be less institutionalized today than in previous decades (Cherlin, 2004), embedded institutional qualities and norms still help differentiate and distinguish this relationship and the nature of the commitment associated with it from that of other romantic unions.

Findings from the current study also carry various implications for research and programming focused on adolescent romantic relationships. First, education on healthy dating relationships for adolescents, including instruction on aspects of commitment, may be hindered if focused only on adolescents' attitudes and cognitions. Given the discrepancy between adolescents' high valuing of commitment and the existence of relationship infidelity documented in studies with demographically similar samples (e.g., Towner et al., 2015), teaching on commitment and other relationship factors may also need to attend to situational and cultural factors (e.g., peer group norms, cultural messages) that can undermine commitment in romantic relationships. A second area warranting attention by practitioners involves conceptual clarity when discussing commitment in adolescent romantic relationships. Advocating commitment in dating carries a different meaning than advocating commitment in marriage; researchers and educators will need to differentiate clearly between the meaning of commitment in each context. This difference in dating versus marital commitment further highlights a more deeply rooted question for researchers and practitioners interested in this area of study, namely, how conceptually similar are adolescent romantic relationships to romantic relationships in adulthood. As Giordano et al. (2005) noted, researchers must "avoid an adult perspective on these [adolescent romantic] relationships," noting that "no research to date has documented that long-duration dating relationships of high intensity are associated with more favorable adolescent or adult outcomes" (pp. 549-550). Accordingly, characteristics of a healthy adolescent romantic relationship and the ways in which commitment should be encouraged across different contexts and ages require intentional thought by researchers and practitioners.

Various limitations warrant consideration when interpreting findings from the study. First, given the sample size, these findings should be considered exploratory until replicated. Prior qualitative research on romantic relationships among urban racial minority adolescents (e.g., Lopez, 2014, $n = 24$; Towner et al., 2015, $n = 28$) has been conducted with comparable sample sizes and offers similar initial insights into understudied populations. Second, as with other qualitative inquiry, generalizability of findings is limited beyond the specific population targeted in the current study. Future work could determine whether central relationship aspects that these youth described (e.g.,

being there, fidelity) also appear among adolescents who reside in different racial and socioeconomic contexts. Third, findings in relation to Domains 2 and 3 may have been affected by the program (Domain 1 comments originated exclusively from Wave 1 interviews; hence, they included no potential for program impact). Concern over this potential confound is mitigated for various reasons, including the lack of program-related comments appearing with any of the commitment comments that comprise each of the domains, as well as scant mention of commitment in any questioning related to program impact. Fourth, the potential for lack of disclosure by youth during the interviewing exists, though study methodology intentionally aimed to reduce the likelihood of this by having multiple interviews across time and interviewers' efforts to develop rapport with each respondent. Finally, given the lack of systematic assessment of commitment beliefs over the 6 months of the study, we were unable to account for or document any maturation of individuals and their understanding of commitment.

In sum, results provide initial findings within a largely underexplored area in the study of commitment and adolescent romantic relationships. Comments from these low-income African American youth described commitment in central terms of support, care, honesty, and fidelity, terms highly similar to those used in the general adult population. Furthermore, the role of commitment in helping provide relational security was also highlighted, particularly, in marriage. If current demographic trends hold, however, the actualization of commitment in romantic relationships during adulthood is uncertain for this sample of low-income African American adolescents. Identifying factors that contribute to the discrepancy that appears even in adolescence between aspiration and actualization of commitment in romantic relationships remains a prominent area for research attention.

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